

Tularemia or “Rabbit Fever”



What is Tularemia?

Tularemia is primarily a disease of rabbits and rodents that can also infect people. Tularemia is caused by bacteria called *Francisella tularensis*, which is found throughout the world. Tularemia is common throughout the United States (including Arizona), but most human cases occur in the Midwest. In Arizona, Tularemia activity may occur in areas above 3,000 feet in elevation. Tularemia is also known as “deer fly fever” or “rabbit fever”.



How is Tularemia acquired?

There are several different ways to contract Tularemia. The most common way to get this disease is by coming in contact with blood and tissues of infected rabbits (especially cottontails) and rodents. This often happens when hunters skin and clean small game without wearing protective gloves. Another way to get Tularemia in Arizona is from the bite of an infected deer fly. Deer flies are most active during the summer and are frequently found near lakes, ponds and streams. In the Midwestern states, Tularemia is often transmitted by certain kinds of ticks. This is not likely to occur in Arizona. It is also possible to become infected by eating undercooked meat from small game animals or by drinking water that has become contaminated by Tularemia infected animals.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of Tularemia can appear within 2-10 days after exposure, but most people experience symptoms within 3-5 days. The usual symptoms include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Chills
- Weakness
- Swollen & tender lymph nodes in the armpit, elbow, groin, or neck area.
- An open sore or ulcer often appears on the skin, at the site of the infection.

If you develop these symptoms after handling or skinning animals, or after being bitten by a deer fly, see your doctor immediately! Tularemia is quite easily diagnosed with laboratory tests. Only a patient's physician can submit samples for testing.

Is Tularemia treatable?

Yes, but Tularemia is a serious illness that requires early diagnosis and treatment by a doctor. Certain antibiotics are effective in treating Tularemia, and with early diagnosis and treatment, is 100% curable.

Who is more likely to get Tularemia?

Anyone can get this disease, although it is more common in males. Hunters have a higher risk of getting Tularemia, since the bacteria can be transmitted when handling and skinning small animals (especially rabbits). Persons living, working, or recreating in areas with deer flies may also be at risk for exposure.



Can Pets Get Tularemia?

Tularemia has been found in more than 100 species of wild and domestic animals, but not all animals become ill. Pets are most likely to get Tularemia from eating infected rabbits or rodents or from deer fly bites.

Cats with Tularemia may have a high fever, a lack of appetite and act sluggish. Dogs with Tularemia have a high fever, nasal and eye discharge, and open skin sores at the site of the infection.

If there is a possibility that your pet has Tularemia, it should be treated by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

For people living in or visiting areas over 3,000 feet in elevation, it is important to prevent your pets from chasing and eating small animals, and to spray or dust them with flea and tick repellent.

What are ways to prevent getting Tularemia?

- Do not handle rabbits or rodents that look sick or act strange.
- Hunters should wear rubber gloves when skinning game to avoid contact with blood and tissues.
- Wash hands with soap and water immediately after preparing game meat.
- Thoroughly cook all game meat before serving.

In areas where deer flies are a problem, wear long sleeves and long pants to cover exposed skin and use insect repellent.

For more information contact your local health department or:



Arizona Department of Health Services
Bureau of Epidemiology & Disease Control
Office of Infectious Disease Services
Vector-Borne and Zoonotic Diseases
150 N. 18th Avenue, Suite 140
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

Tel: (602) 364-4562 Fax: (602) 364-3198

Toll free: (800) 314-9243

Arizona website: www.azdhs.gov/phs/oids/vector/index.htm

CDC Website: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_tularemia.htm